



Many years ago, when the fair land of Italia lay under the hand of priests of a false god, who, being more confident of their worldly power were yet more barbarous in their ways than they now are - in that time, be it said, there lived a maid who surpassed all the children of her village in beauty of body and soul.

Now the mother of this maid had it in mind that she should become a nun - which is to say a votary, not consecrated by sacred rites to our dear Lady, but bound to the servitude of the false god.

This maid had read but little, and the books of that time contained nothing but the falsehoods of the priests; but a guileless heart is always the surest guide, and in her heart she knew that what her mother wanted was not good. But when she said this, her mother replied: "If you will not become a nun, you must marry the man I choose."

"Oh, no," replied the maid, "for I must find my way, and then I shall be loyal and obedient. But first I must seek my true path." At this, her mother flew at her and beat her. But the maid spoke bravely through her tears, and said: "If you treat me so ill, I shall flee to the forests, and dwell among my sisters, the beasts of the wood."

And her mother became frightened, and decided to try another method; for she knew of an old woman noted for her wisdom and power of persuasion. "This maid," she thought, "will be able to change the heart of my daughter." And so she sent for her to become the governess and attendant of her daughter, and the woman, being poor, agreed.

The daughter and the governess became the firmest friends, and neither one spoke of the nunnery even once. Instead, the governess taught her to love the forest and its creatures, which was for her an easy lesson; she taught her the names and the uses of the herbs, and how to heal the ills of both body and soul, and a hundred other arts that seem sheer miracle to the uninitiated. And all this time, the mother grew more impatient.

Now it happened that the maid was in the habit of lying awake at night to listen to the song of the nightingales, and at these times she had often heard her governess in the next room arise and go out on to the great balcony. And one night she decided to follow her. When she arrived, she saw the older woman kneeling beneath the great midsummer moon, speaking words in a low voice that she had not heard before. And she was filled with a great wonder, though she knew not why, and could not move from that spot.

Thus, when the governess had finished her prayers, she turned around and saw the maid. She was not angry, but said simply: "So, you are here. I have expected you. I knew that our Lady would bring you when you were ready."

"Mean you Maria?" asked the child.

"She is called by many names, and that is one of them. But those who call Her by it know Her least!"

A thrill passed through the soul of the girl, for she realised that her true path lay before her. With trembling voice, she asked: "And who, then, know Her most?"

"I could tell you much," said the older woman, "but these are wicked times, and you would be in constant danger of a cruel death."

"For Her sake I shall fear nothing," said the girl.

The older woman made the Pentacle upon herself in thanks. "I had hoped you would speak thus," she said. "I have taught you all the arts of a priestess in this land, excepting the most important of them all - the art of loving the Goddess. What I have already taught you, no priest would believe, for though they prate endlessly of their gods and their devils, they have no true belief in anything beyond the material. But now you must work as you have not worked before; for my time on this earth grows short, and there must be one to take my place."

In the weeks that followed, the maid learnt truths that had been known since the dawn of time - the Truth of the Goddess. And she became consecrated to Her as Her priestess.

But her mother became seized with impatience, and expelled the old woman from the house, and locked her daughter in a tower room with nowhere to sleep save the bare stone floor, and neither food nor drink. "There shall you stay," she cried, "until you are ready to become a nun."

But the young priestess said to herself: "Here shall I have silence and time to fast and pray, and when I am ready, my Lady shall release me." And for three days she prayed without ceasing. And on the third night, her mother came to berate her and left, forgetting in her rage to lock the door. And the girl left the house in the hour before dawn.

And donning a pilgrim's robe, she travelled about the country, preaching and teaching the religion of the one Goddess.

The people adored her and were converted in their hundreds, and they called her la bella pellegrina - the beautiful pilgrim. And many travelled miles that they might fall on their knees and worship her, but she would say: "Not I, but She who is greater; not matter, but spirit; not mortality, but Life eternal."

But at last her mother found her and had her arrested, and asked in an evil temper whether she would become a nun, and she replied: "That cannot be, for I belong to the one true Goddess, and I have died to the world and all its false gods, and so too will you, if you have wisdom to know Truth when you have heard it." But the mother gave her up to the priests to put her to torture and death, as they did to all who would not agree with them or who left their religion.

The people were seized with pity and anger and would have stormed the house where she was held, but it was guarded by many soldiers, and she was watched night and day. But they prayed as she had taught them, and she prayed also, and on the morning of the day that she was to be tortured and killed, a great wind arose in the heavens, a wind such as had not been seen before, and it overthrew the house so that not one stone was left standing upon another, and all were thrown into terror and confusion. But Hera Pellegrina walked away with calm dignity, and was taken by her people into the forests; and never again did the profane lay hands on her, but she lived to a great age teaching the Truth of the Goddess and guiding the faithful both in body and soul.

But ill luck followed all who tried to rebuild the great house that had been destroyed, and in the end the priests grudgingly gave it over to the people as common land, and on it the affairs of all who loved the Goddess prospered as though a charm were upon them. And this land was ever called La Casa al Vento - The House of the Wind.

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